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SUBJECT: OFFICIAL IRANIAN REACTION TO CHARGES OF OCCUPYING IRAQI OIL FIELD

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) According to Iranian press IRIG officials have consistently denied Iranian military forces have crossed into Iraq and seized an oil well on December 18, with Iran claiming that foreign press reports of the seizure were intended to disrupt the friendly relations between the two countries. On December 19, Iranian officials claimed that the Iraqis had agreed to form a bilateral arbitration commission to settle the disputed area.

¶2. (SBU) On December 19 Foreign Ministry spokesman Rahmin Mehmanparast told semi-official news agency ISNA that reports of an Iranian incursion into Iraq to seize the well were "baseless propaganda." He added that these "fabrications" were intended to undermine Iranian and Iraqi relations ahead of the Iraqi parliamentary elections, a point repeated by other Iranian officials elsewhere. He maintained that Iran was prepared to settle the dispute over the area diplomatically, under the terms of the 1975 Algiers treaty between Iraq and Iran. Mehmanparast stressed that Iran had previously proposed creating a commission to handle border issues but had never received an Iraqi response. BBC Persian quoted Majlis Foreign Relations and Foreign Policy Committee member Hossein Ebrahimi as saying that Iran has gone to great lengths to demonstrate its goodwill toward Iraq, even dropping reference to what he claimed were billions of dollars in compensation owed Iran from the Iran-Iraq War. Iran's ambassador in Baghdad, Hassan Kazem-Qomi, also denied any Iranian troops were on Iraqi territory.

¶3. (SBU) Later, other Iranian media reported that the Iraqis had agreed to mediate the dispute. ISNA reported December 19 that Foreign Minister Mottaki and Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari spoke via telephone over what was described as a "misunderstanding among border officials" and agreement was reached to form a technical committee to resolve this and other border issues.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: At first take, it is difficult to discern Iran's intentions. Iran's denials ring hollow, especially when considered in light of the consistent statements made by various IRIG officials on Iran's willingness to discuss this disputed area with their Iraqi counterparts. It seems unlikely that this foray was primarily an effort to stake a claim to a single oil well, and it could be that IRIG has a broader purpose in mind in trying to bring the Iraqis into discussions on border delineation. END COMMENT.
EYRE